

Legislative Report 2005

Spring 2005

Dear Neighbors,

We have just finished a session that was both challenging and incredibly productive. Lawmakers came to Olympia in January knowing we faced a budget deficit for the third biennium in a row. Yet even with a \$1.7 billion shortfall, we were able to make significant investments in education and health care without a general tax increase. It was important to us to approve a budget that uses state dollars efficiently while protecting the services and programs vital to a healthy Washington citizenry.

We overhauled treatment for the mentally ill and chemically dependent, creating a streamlined system that will save the state big in the coming years. We restored health insurance to thousands of children from low-income families. We opened the doors to higher education wider by boosting enrollment capacity at our state's public colleges and universities. And we invested in reducing K-12 class sizes and giving teachers a cost-of-living adjustment.

The budget does include some cuts and a modest revenue package, most of which will go toward funding education. We maintain a healthy reserve of about \$200 million.

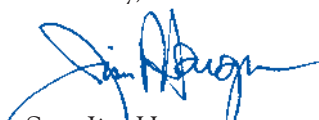
To do all of this without a general tax increase was not easy. But it showed that we can solve problems with a little bit of creativity and a lot of hard work. With the closest governor's race in state history fresh in our minds, it was more important than ever this year to work in a bipartisan manner to keep our state moving forward. We are proud to have done so.

Another important issue was protecting the public's right to know what their government — at all levels — is up to. A recent Supreme Court decision made it more difficult for citizens to request information from elected officials and agencies, but we reinstated the spirit of a 30-year tradition of open government.

On a more local note, we passed a capital budget that will make vital improvements to our community colleges and the Jefferson County Courthouse, and we saved the city ambulance service for Aberdeen, Hoquiam and Port Angeles.

We appreciate the opportunity to serve the people of the 24th District. Please contact us if you have questions or want more information on issues affecting the Olympic Peninsula.

Sincerely,


Sen. Jim Hargrove
State Senator


Rep. Lynn Kessler
State Representative



Sen. Jim Hargrove



Rep. Lynn Kessler

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Education

There is no greater investment in the future health of our state economy than education. To stay competitive, businesses in our state want schools that produce a well-trained work force. This session, we supported several measures that will strengthen our education system.

K-12

We believe every student — rich or poor, urban or rural — deserves a quality education. The budget makes a significant investment in public K-12 education, funding two people's initiatives that will lower class sizes and give a cost-of-living increase to school employees. These measures have been put off because of economic hard times, and we're pleased to be able to fund them.

The budget also earmarks an additional \$10.4 million for special education, and enhances the Learning Assistance Program (LAP), which gives a boost to struggling students.

In addition, the construction budget includes a record-high \$605 million for school construction. Kids learn best when they are in modern, safe facilities.



Higher Education

Washington's public colleges and universities are bursting at the seams.

We greatly expanded baccalaureate degree programs this session, adding 7,900 enrollment slots and permitting select branch campuses to offer lower-division courses beginning next year.

Further, the state's community and technical college system now has the go-ahead to develop applied bachelor's degrees on a pilot program basis.

Graving dock

We continue to monitor the progress on the rebuilding of the Hood Canal Floating Bridge. This project was slowed after workers discovered a Native American burial ground near the graving dock — an onshore dry dock used to build concrete parts for the bridge — in Port Angeles. We are still working to see that the bridge anchors are built on that site.

The bridge provides a vital link between the Northern Olympic Peninsula and Kitsap, King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. It's important that this project move forward to maintain the economy of the whole north peninsula.



Local ambulance service

Due to a Supreme Court decision earlier this year, many small cities around the state, including Aberdeen, Hoquiam and Port Angeles, lost the ability to supply ambulance services.

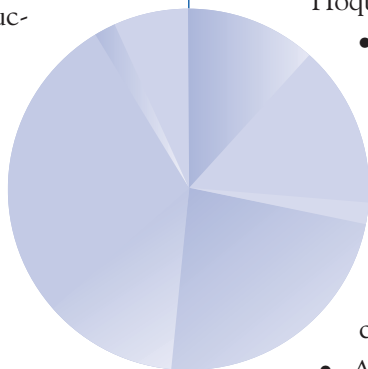
Rep. Kessler sponsored a bill that restored the right of cities to fund and manage ambulance services when no adequate private service exists.

The testimony of Dan McKeen, Port Angeles Fire Chief, was instrumental in helping us pass this bill, saving the ambulance services in our district.

Capital budget

We are pleased that the 2005-2007 state construction budget included money for several high-priority projects in the 24th District, including:

- \$22.4 million for a state-of-the art science and technology building at Peninsula College
- \$19.7 million for new classroom space at Grays Harbor College



- \$600,000 for improvements to the historic 7th Street Theatre in Hoquiam
- \$250,000 for a pedestrian and emergency access bridge across Conner Creek near Copalis Beach
- \$450,000 to rehabilitate the Jefferson County Courthouse clock tower
- About \$6 million for upgrades at Fort Worden State Park



Prescription medicines

Modern medicine means modern prescription drugs. Yet three out of five seniors lack dependable coverage for the medicines they need to stay healthy and alive. That's because Americans pay the highest prices in the world.

We voted for reform that lets cities, counties and other groups save money on medicine by joining the state's bulk purchasing pool.

Legislation also passed that would allow residents to buy cheaper drugs from Canada.

Mental health treatment

This year, lawmakers approved a landmark piece of legislation that will make substantial changes to the treatment of the mentally ill and chemically dependent. We fought hard for this bill (Senate Bill 5763), which Sen. Hargrove sponsored, because we knew it was the best way to get the proper treatment for individuals suffering from these often co-occurring disorders.

The measure expands services for Medicaid-eligible people and implements pilot programs: one for secure detoxification facilities and another for intensive management for those people who are frequent users of emergency, crisis and correctional facilities. Getting these people the appropriate treatment now will save the state big money over time.

By treating these disorders in a proactive and effective way, we will cut crime and save the state billions of dollars in the coming years in criminal justice, child welfare and public assistance costs. Our current piecemeal system is an expensive and futile way to treat the problem.

In another boost for mental health treatment in Washington, the 2005-2007 operating budget replaces \$80 million in federal Medicaid cuts, which will help protect state mental-health programs. And a bill also passed that requires insurance companies to offer the same coverage for mental health treatment as they do for physical conditions. Small businesses are exempt from the rule.

We made incredible strides this session toward ensuring that mental health treatment is taken seriously in our state. In the end, it's a victory not only for taxpayers but for the safety of our communities.

Natural resources

DNR timber harvest

The operating budget includes a provision that allows the Department of Natural Resources to retain a higher percentage — 30 percent — of revenues from harvest of timber on school trust lands for the 2005-2007 biennium. This is a short-term provision that will allow the department to implement a new sustained harvest plan and the ongoing Habitat Conservation Plan. The department is required to submit a report to the Legislature by Jan. 9, 2006, explaining how they used the increased set-aside.

Drought response and fire preparedness

After an extremely dry winter, the mountain snowpack is unusually low. The governor declared a statewide

Election Reform

Our state has one of the highest voter participation rates in the country, and we are proud of that. However, the last election made it clear that our election system needs some fixing. We made progress this session but we have more work to do.

The Legislature enacted a series of bills that will help voters feel confident in the process. It is important to us not to erect new barriers that would hinder legitimate voters, but we also need to make sure the voter rolls are accurate.

Under measures the Legislature passed this year, the secretary of state now is required to systematically review voter rolls to ensure that those ineligible are not registered. We also adopted voter identification guidelines that closely mirror the federal standards: government identification cards, registration cards, bank statements or utility bills.



drought emergency in March, and this could be one of the worst fire seasons on record. This year's budget includes more than \$8 million for drought preparedness measures.

We learned some important lessons during the 2001 statewide drought emergency, and have worked since then to prepare communities, farmers and state hatcheries for future droughts. We believe the state is ready to respond in the event of wildfires.

Court funding

Amid concerns that our existing court funding is inadequate, Sen. Hargrove sponsored a measure that creates a dedicated funding source to meet the state's obligations in the areas of indigent criminal defense, indigent civil legal services and trial court improvements.

The money comes mainly from increased civil filing fees in district and superior courts.

The state is required to provide adequate representation to criminal indigent defendants and to parents in dependency and termination cases. This funding will help ease the burden on local jurisdictions and improve public safety and access to justice by making sure our justice system has the money to function properly.

Sen. Jim Hargrove



Public Disclosure

Rep. Kessler sponsored a measure to make it easier for members of the public to get information *about* their government *from* their government.

In the early 1970's, Washington citizens passed an initiative that opened government records and operations for all to see. A Supreme Court decision recently made obtaining information much more difficult, but we passed a law that simplified the process. We believe that an open government is a vital part of democracy, and that citizens have the right to know what their representatives are doing.

Despite attempts by some elected officials to exempt their own records, we voted to make our legislative information subject to the same rules as local governments and every other state agency.

Rep. Lynn Kessler



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